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ABSTRACT

The demographic characteristics of teenaged parents reveal a majority who are aged 18-21, live in poverty, have dropped out of school, and are unemployed and unmarried. Their potential for high school graduation is often dependent upon their support network and life course adaptation. Employment patterns of teen parents show high unemployment and sporadic history for both sides. Given the educational, social, economic, and employment histories common among teenaged parents, career development is a priority for helping this group make the transition from adolescence to economic independence. A number of psychosocial factors have been identified as affecting the education and training of teen parents. Development of life skills has been suggested to help teen parents overcome the ramifications of their disadvantaged backgrounds. Several projects have been initiated to help teenaged parents in their transition to adulthood and economic independence: the Public/Private Ventures' Young Unwed Fathers Pilot Project, The Comprehensive Career Development Project for Secondary Schools in Tennessee, and the Adolescent Family Life Demonstration Projects. Three factors which greatly influence the implementation of the Adolescent Family Life employability programs and important across the other projects are: appropriateness of the program to the targeted population, the community network and influence, and after-care or post-program follow-up. Contains 6 references. (YLB)

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DIGEST
NO. 148

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Career Education for Teen Parents

by Bettina A. Lankard

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Early parenthood and its effect on the education, employment, and economic dependence of the upcoming generation of adult citizens in the United States is a national concern. Although the number of teenagers is decreasing, the incidence of teenage pregnancies is not. Over 10 percent (1 in 10) of all teenage girls become pregnant each year. Some of these girls will elect to terminate their pregnancies, but many will carry their babies to term and give birth. "Between 1986 and 1989, teen birthrates in the United States increased 15 percent to their highest level in 15 years" (Rosenheim and Testa 1992, p. 1). The outlook for these teen parents who have educational deficiencies, episodic work histories, and other barriers to employment is not good. This special population of young adults will need increased help in all areas of career preparation—academic and vocational education, employability and life skills development—if they are to overcome the difficulties that hinder their successful transition to adulthood.

This *Digest* examines the demographic, life course, and employment characteristics of teenaged parents and explores their psychosocial, life management, and job-related needs, highlighting the characteristics and outcomes of recent career development programs designed to assist them.

Characteristics of Teenage Parenthood

The traditional progression from adolescence to adulthood has been education, job preparation and employment, marriage and parenthood. Contemporary teenage parenthood represents a variation in that traditional pattern, which in many cases is thought to be intentional. Rosenheim and Testa (ibid.) propose that the "recent rise in levels of teenage childbearing is not simply the chance result of unprotected sexual intercourse but may reflect teenagers' decision to deviate from society's age-graded pathway to adulthood" (p. 10). They note that the shrinking number of unskilled jobs that once supported large numbers of youth and the increasing educational and training requirements for current and emerging skilled jobs are lengthening youth transition from adolescence to adulthood by as much as 10 years. The extension of economic dependency into the middle or late 20s "requires young people to follow a lengthened social timetable for when they complete their education, school, enter the labor force, marry, and become parents" (ibid., p. 3). Although increasing numbers of youth are adapting to this lengthened timetable, the adaptation by low-income and minority youth is lagging. "Adolescents from disadvantaged classes, especially in nations that tolerate greater social inequalities, see less reward for delaying their transition to parenthood" (ibid., p. 16). Unfortunately, the ramifications of such decisions are costly, to teenaged parents, their children, and society.

The demographic characteristics of teenaged parents reveal a majority who are in the 18-21 year range, live in poverty, have dropped out of school, and are unemployed and unmarried. Although some teenagers resume their education after they become parents, their potential for high school graduation is often dependent upon their support network and life course adaptation. Data from a study of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients in Chicago and suburban Cook County, Illinois, show that "high school graduation was strongly dependent on adolescent welfare recipients' remaining in their parental home and delaying marriage" (ibid., p. 110). More than half of the women in the study who chose this living option earned a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate by age 20.

In general, it appears that teen mothers tend to have greater educational success than teen fathers. Achatz and MacAllum (1994) report that in their study of young unwed fathers over half (53 percent) of the teenaged mothers in the study sample obtained a high school diploma or GED certificate, whereas only 38 percent of the fathers did.

Employment patterns of teen parents show high unemployment and sporadic employment history for both sides. The unemployment rate for teenaged mothers in March 1988 was 39.4 percent, with the rate for black teenage mothers reaching 48.8 percent (Nash 1991). Current statistics for teenaged fathers, obtained from the young unwed fathers study, show 57 percent of the fathers in the sample were not employed at the time of the study. Of those who were employed at intake, 61 percent had been on their jobs for 4 months or less (Achatz and MacAllum 1994). Barriers to employment include family responsibilities, expectations of others, lack of role models and supports, transportation problems, unfamiliarity with the employment network, criminal records, alcohol, and drugs.

Career Development Needs of Teenage Parents

Given the educational, social, economic, and employment histories common among teenaged parents, career development is a priority for helping this group make the transition from adolescence to economic independence. These early parents are in special need of psychosocial development, life skills development, career awareness, and job skills development.

Ettinger (1991) lists a number of psychosocial factors that affect the education and training of teen parents (p. 8-5): low self-esteem; low aspirations, motivation, and expectations; unrealistic goals and ambitions; limited emotional resources for support and maintenance; and lack of role models. To help teen parents overcome the ramifications of their disadvantaged backgrounds, Ettinger suggests that attention be given to the development of the following types of life skills (p. 8-5):

- Building of self-concept
- Building support systems
- Learning how to access available child care, transportation services and other support services necessary to one's survival
- Learning how to meet the challenge of combining work and family roles

- Learning how to give and receive emotional support
- Networking for work opportunities and connections
- Enhancing interpersonal communication and relationships

The importance of career awareness and career choice options is discussed by Nash (1991), who emphasizes that teenaged mothers, particularly, are at the planning stages of their career lives. Since many of these women will be the sole support of their families, they need to be aware of and consider the salaries associated with various occupations as well as the academic/skill requirements before selecting an area to pursue. The same is true for teenaged fathers as they match their interests and abilities to various career options. There is much information available about nontraditional jobs for men and women, and each state has a sex equity coordinator who oversees programs for disadvantaged people seeking to obtain nontraditional employment. Information about programs available within the state can be obtained from these coordinators.

Several projects have been initiated to help teenaged parents in their transition to adulthood and economic independence. One such program is the Public/Private Ventures' Young Unwed Fathers Pilot Project. This project studied 460 young fathers 16-24 years old enrolled at 6 sites for 2 years. The goal of the project was to help young fathers, poor and from families and neighborhoods with few resources and economic opportunities, to acknowledge their parenting obligations and gain the skills and access the opportunities to help them meet those obligations. ***Young Unwed Fathers: Report from the Field***, an intensive 18-month ethnographic study of 47 young fathers from this group, notes the following modest outcomes. "Twice as many fathers were working at the time of the follow-up survey than were working at intake, though nearly half were not employed. Average weekly earnings of fathers employed at follow-up were $100 higher than those of fathers who were employed at intake; however it is not possible to determine whether these gains were due to the program intervention or would have occurred naturally through maturation and additional work experience" (Achatz and MacAllum 1994, p. 11). The report points out that the public welfare, child support enforcement, and employment training systems often work counter to the young men's desires to improve their skills and income.

Another project—The Comprehensive Career Development Project for Secondary Schools in Tennessee—has been reviewed in a monograph written by practitioners involved in the project's implementation. In his part of the monograph, Hale (1989) recommends two ways of addressing the problem of teenage parenthood: (1) sex education and (2) the provision of school-based day care and parenting centers for those teenagers who are already (or soon will be) parents. According to Hale "these strategies have proven viable and effective avenues for giving the students a better chance to complete their education, while also offering training in responsible parenting" (p. 35).

The Adolescent Family Life Demonstration Projects, which were initiated in Fall 1987, expanded the health, education, and social service programs to include employability development components. Each of the six sites selected for the project—Camden, New Jersey; Savannah, Georgia; Houston, Texas; Tucson, Arizona; San Francisco, California; and Salem, Oregon—used different models for increasing the employability of teenage parents. The employability components initiated across the six sites included education/employment counseling for adolescent mothers, preemployment and vocational skills training, employability and parenting skills development, and social work counseling for fathers. The goal of the projects was to increase employability skills (education and job readiness), not necessarily employment. The majority of the project participants were female, single, and had never been married. The racial composition varied depending on the site. In Savannah, for example, the participants were primarily black teenage mothers who had dropped out of school and had no employment history. At the conclusion of the project, 40 percent of the program participants at all six sites who had been dropouts were in a school program (Cohen 1991, p. 12). Almost half of the participants in the Savannah site returned to some type of educational program. The majority of the participants at the Tucson and San Francisco sites stayed in school and increased their grade levels.

Cohen identified three factors that greatly influence the implementation of the Adolescent Family Life employability programs:

- Appropriateness of the program to the targeted population
- The community network and influence
- After-care or post-program follow-up

The importance of these factors is consistent across other projects as well.

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